

Community Advisory: Leptospirosis in Dogs

April 2006

Washington State, and particularly King County, has seen an increase in leptospirosis in dogs, with 95 cases reported to public health departments between October 2004 and April 2006. Most cases have occurred in Western Washington (King, Pierce, Mason, Thurston, Kitsap, Snohomish, Whatcom, and Gray's Harbor counties) with just a few cases in eastern Washington (Spokane and Columbia counties). In 2005, there were also 3 human cases (Pierce, Clark and Skagit counties). A map of cases and updated case numbers can be found at www.doh.wa.gov/EHSPHL/Epidemiology/CD/ci/caninelepto.htm

King County has seen the greatest number of cases, and the outbreak has particularly affected Vashon and Maury Islands. So far this year, 32 dogs from Vashon/Maury Island have been reported with leptospirosis and there has been an additional 10 cases from elsewhere in King County. Sadly, some dogs have died or had to be euthanized due to the severity of their illness. Fortunately no King County residents are known to have become infected during this outbreak, but humans can get leptospirosis so it is important for residents to know how to protect themselves.

This advisory describes the disease in dogs, how it is spread, how to protect pets and people from getting the infection, and where to get more information.

Leptospirosis is a disease caused by bacteria shed in the urine of infected animals.

- Wild animals such as rats, raccoons, skunks and opossums can carry the bacteria and contaminate puddles, wetlands, vegetation, or soil with their urine. The bacteria can live in wet environments for up to 6 weeks. Many domestic animals (e.g., dogs, horses, cows, pigs) can get leptospirosis, but it is rare in cats.
- A person or dog gets leptospirosis by drinking water contaminated by urine, or by getting contaminated water on the skin (usually if the skin is abraded or if cuts are present) or on mucous membranes of the eye, nose or mouth.

Infection in dogs can cause symptoms from mild illness to very serious disease.

- Signs are: poor appetite or not eating at all; fever; loss of energy; doesn't want to play; more frequent urination; vomiting; muscle stiffness; and red eyes. The disease can cause kidney or liver failure.
- Leptospirosis is diagnosed by blood or urine tests and is treated with antibiotics. Early diagnosis and treatment by your veterinarian improves the chances for full recovery for your dog, and can reduce the risk of spread to people. Call your veterinarian if you think your dog may have symptoms or if you have questions about leptospirosis and your pet.

- New improved vaccines are available for dogs; however not all leptospirosis strains are covered by the vaccine. Dog owners may contact their veterinarian to discuss whether vaccination is advisable.

Dog owners should reduce their pet's exposure to water or soil that may be contaminated by urine from rodents, raccoons or other wild animals.

- Eliminate sources of food like bird feeders, outdoor pet food, garbage, fallen fruit, and scattered livestock grain to avoid attracting rats and raccoons to your property. Remove shelters like junk, woodpiles, unused cars or trailers, and seal up entry points into houses, sheds, and outbuildings. For more tips, see www.metrokc.gov/health/env_hlth/Rats.htm or call Public Health at 206-205-4394.
- In some cases, it may be advisable to contact a professional pest control company for assistance with rodent or raccoon control. Citizens should not trap raccoons or other wild animals and move them to other locations.

People could contract leptospirosis from the same environmental sources as dogs, or from an infected dog's urine.

- Wear gloves if you are in contact with soil, water or wet areas that may be contaminated by animal urine. Use a disinfectant such as Lysol or a solution of 1 part household bleach to 10 parts of water for clean up of animal urine, and be sure to wash your hands thoroughly afterwards.
- Leptospirosis is an uncommon disease in people, although the Washington State Department of Health reported an increase in human cases in 2005 (see first website link below). The symptoms include fever, severe headache, pain in the back and/or legs, vomiting, and diarrhea. If you have questions about leptospirosis in humans, call your medical provider or you may contact Public Health at 206-296-4774.

For additional information

- About leptospirosis in people and dogs in Washington State see www.doh.wa.gov/EHSPHL/Epidemiology/CD/ci/caninelepto.htm.
- About prevention in humans see www.metrokc.gov/health/prevcont/facts/index.htm#

About pets and leptospirosis see

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/leptospirosis_g_pet.htm